

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Ronald W. Botts, Minister for Pastoral Care, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 25, 2007, the 34th Sunday of Ordinary Time and dedicated to the glory of God!

“The End”

Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:33-43

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When he awoke...he found himself in bed; and Merivale was there, stooping over him and smiling. “Well, you old ruffian—feeling all right? That was a fine shock you gave us!”

[Mr.] Chips murmured, after a pause, and in a voice that surprised him by its weakness: “Why—um—what—what has happened?”

“Merely that you threw a faint. Mrs. Wickett came in and found you—lucky she did. You’re all right now. Take it easy. Sleep again if you feel inclined.”

He was glad someone had suggested such a good idea....But it wasn’t quite wakefulness, either; it was a sort of in-between state, full of dreams and faces and voices....

Once he heard them talking about him in the room. Cartwright was whispering to Merivale. “poor old chap—must have lived a lonely sort of life, all by himself.”

Merivale answered: “Not always by himself. He married, you know.”

“Oh did he? I never knew about that.”

“She died. It must have been—oh quite thirty years ago. More possibly”

“Pity. Pity he never had any children....”

[Chips] struggled, slowly, with his words.” What was that—um—you were saying—about me—just now?... I thought I heard one of you—saying it was a pity—umph—a pity I never had—any children...eh?...But I have, you know...I have...thousands of them...thousands of them...and all boys.”

And soon Chips was asleep. He seemed so peaceful that they did not disturb him to say goodnight, but in the morning, as the school bell sounded for breakfast, Brookfield had the news. “Brookfield will never forget his loveliness,” said Cartwright, in a speech to the school. Which was absurd, because all things are forgotten in the end. But [he thought] Linford, at any rate, will remember and tell the tale, “I said good-bye to Chips the night before he died....”

The End

That’s a somewhat abbreviated version of the last chapter of James Hilton’s *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, the story of a beloved teacher in a English boarding school, and later made into a movie starring Robert Donat and Greer Garson.

It concludes in print and on the screen with the same words: “The End.” So there’s no doubt that it’s over, that this is all the story has to tell. You’ve heard the final word.

The End. *El Fin* in Spanish. *Fine* in Italian. There are equivalents in all languages, and they all indicate the same concluding fact. Even the old Looney Tunes cartoons ended with Porky Pig saying, “That’s all folks!” There is no more. Don’t even consider it.

Turn up the theater lights. Close the book cover. There’s no epilogue, no curtain call. That’s it!

In the life of the Church this is the last Sunday in the Season of Pentecost. It is the **end** of the story of Jesus Christ. Today is our liturgical New Year's Eve: week 52 of 52. The cycle is complete. The telling of the Good News is over.

Advent, which starts next Sunday, is the beginning of the story all over again. It starts with the prophecies of the awaited Messiah and repeats the familiar stories of the Christ Child's birth.

Today the crucifixion scenario returns once again in our lesson, but this time with the promise that it is **really** the final chapter. This ends it all and gives a conclusion to the entire presentation. It's very neatly done, and our emphasis in recent years on a common lectionary, *i.e.* the texts selected for reading each Sunday, presents it with even more organization. Of course, this Scripture construct is of our own doing. Human hands have shaped what it is today, even though it is based on the sacred texts.

The Gospels actually tell the story in more proper order, because they present a more or less chronological picture of the life of Christ. They begin at the beginning and end at the end. Our liturgical year has to work around the fact that—early on—the birth and death of Jesus were recalled in the Church at definite times of the year. So we are forced to move from birth to adoration, to the beginning of the ministry, to the entry into Jerusalem, challenge by the authorities, death and resurrection at Easter—and then turn to the teachings of Jesus and the experience of the early Church during the second half of the liturgical year.

In order to tie everything up we have returned again from instruction and reflection to the last days in Jerusalem. It would seem strange to be right in the middle of Jesus' parables, for example, and then simply to declare "The End." Why, congregations wouldn't stand for it. You might be tempted to withhold your donations because the narrative would seem so incomplete, like being without the last chapter of a book or the final reel of a movie!

Unlike most stories, however, the story of Jesus Christ does not end in a traditional way. For 2000 years Christians have affirmed that death is not the final word in this extraordinary story, but that our Lord surmounted it. His death may have been the termination of a finite body, but it led to the timelessness of his spirit as he stepped into life eternal. In so doing, he came into his full power. It was this innate power of Jesus that one of the criminals sensed in our scripture for today. “Remember me,” he pleads, “when you come into your kingdom.” Think of me, and my soul, which longs for reconciliation with God.

There are two similar, but distinct, elements at work in our story from Luke; force and power. The Roman soldiers who taunted Jesus and carried out the crucifixion represent force. They are like strong civil rulers who can make things happen—people like Hitler and Stalin, Pol Pot, and Idi Ammin. They had force behind them to coerce and impose their way on others. Their kingdoms were, indeed, very forceful for a while, but eventually each regime fell because there was no sustaining power behind them.

On the contrary, the accomplishments of the dictators of the world pale in comparison to those who possess little force but, instead, embody the dynamic power of ideals. In this category I would place Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatmas Gandhi and Mother Teresa. They are the ones whom history will remember because they had the ability to, first, change the outlook of people and then to change their whole lives. Their power continues beyond them, as it does most notably in the one we recognize today as Lord and Savior. This power has nothing to do with armaments, but with a power of the spirit.

There is a scene in a Marx Brothers movie where the camera pans down from the top of a skyscraper until it gets down to the sidewalk where Harpo is leaning against the side of the building. A cop comes along and asks him, “Whatya think you’re doing, propping up the bank? Harpo nods a simple yes, which just infuriates the officer.

“Go on with ya,” the cop responds and motions with his nightstick. So Harpo shrugs his shoulders and moves away from the wall, whereupon the huge building collapses behind him.

For those who have come to know Jesus and his power, that is the way he holds up our lives. He keeps us standing when the forces of life would threaten to topple us. He keeps us connected when the winds of change would want to blow us away from our moorings. He keeps us afloat when the waves of life would likely engulf us.

If you don’t know this Jesus, I invite you to discover him for he is there waiting for you. If you’ve found him already, then I encourage you to let him do for you what he has promised.

The church year ends today but, you see, the story is not over. The sequel is ready to begin. If you thought the narrative was good to this point, you’re going to find even more of value in the year that is coming.

The final line of the story today is not about death and despair—nothing like that—but is affirmed instead in a declaration of ultimate power: “Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!”

That summarizes and concludes an amazing story of God’s love, and so the last words of this book, the last frames of this film, might be better expressed by closing with “The End...and The Beginning.”